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ABSTRACT

Canada's public schools are essential public goods resources. For children to benefit, parents cooperate in efforts to support and enhance their children's education. In today's multicultural communities, parents have an increasingly complex mix of expectations, cultural beliefs, values, and assumptions regarding educational systems. Differing cultural and class backgrounds impact not only parents' worldview but also their specific goals for children. Educators note the increasing concern of parents in ensuring their children are prepared in terms of the embodied capital (knowledge, values, and skills) required for success in today's competitive labor markets. In this vein, a trend for academically advantaged parents to try to influence public school systems on behalf of their own children has been noted. On the other hand, Aboriginal parents wrestle with the appropriate role of traditional Aboriginal knowledge and cultural identity in public education, as well as issues related to continuing assimilationist impacts of the boarding school experience. In many mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal school systems, the sharing of increasingly scarce collective resources can result in misunderstandings and the failure to meet educational needs identified by either group. These issues are demonstrated in the experience of a small Northwest Territories (Canada) community with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents. (Contains 27 references.) (TD)

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Issues In Shared Schools In Mixed Aboriginal & Non-Aboriginal School Systems

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Abstract

Canada's public educational programs are essential public goods resources. In order for children to benefit parents must cooperate in efforts to support and enhance their children's education. In today's multicultural communities we see an increasingly complex mix of parent's expectations, cultural beliefs and the values and assumptions of educational systems. Differing cultural and class backgrounds impact not only parent's worldview but also their specific goals for children. Educators' note the increasing focus and concern of parents in ensuring their children are prepared in terms of the embodied capitol (knowledge, values and skills) required for success in today's competitive labor markets. In this vein, a trend for academically advantaged parents to try to influence public school systems on behalf of their own children has been noted. For aboriginal parents the situation is complex and impacted by both the historical context as well as evolving cultural expectations. Parents wrestle with the appropriate role of traditional aboriginal knowledge and cultural identity in public education as well as issues related to continuing assimilationist impacts of the school experience. This presentation will focus on this issue as experienced in a small Northwest Territories community made up of aboriginal and non-aboriginal residents. Cross cultural differences between parents' priorities for their children's education and the impact of these differing agendas appear at times to be experienced as obstacles to cooperative efforts despite common concern for their children's success. The proposed course of research to be carried out by the presenter to investigate this experience further will be outlined.

"I went to that school as a boy and I remember the nuns and how strict they were. Sister used to tell me I was stupid and would never learn anything when I tried to ask for help. It hurts me to go into that building but I do because I have three children in that school and I want them to have a better experience than I did. I want them to be able to learn what they need to get good jobs, but I also want them to be proud of who they are. I want them to know about their own culture so they won't feel ashamed like I did."

"This school worries too much about listening to the native parents who want more cultural activities. That's all well and good for once in a while but in the mean time our kids are getting further and further behind kids in southern schools. We need to focus on the three R's first, then if there's extra time, do cultural activities. If we don't they'll never be ready for University. I'm so worried I'm thinking about taking my kids out and doing home schooling instead."

Introduction

As my oldest child prepared to enter the school system in the small Northwest Territories community where I lived for fourteen years, I experienced the anticipation that most parents do. How would my child fit in? Would the school's goals be consistent with what I wanted for him? However, I was also aware of other voices, voices of concern amongst community parents about the school, its curricula and its teaching methods. The nature of these concerns appeared to reflect the differing views of the communities Dene, Metis and Non-aboriginal parents. Aboriginal parents, reflecting on their own often negative educational experiences, appeared to be concerned about the impact of a lack of culturally relevant programming on their children's development. Non-aboriginal parents raised questions regarding the standards and the quality of the education delivered in this Northwest Territories school as compared to those in southern Canada.

As I continued my introduction to this milieu it became apparent that cross-cultural differences, lying below the surface in most of the day-to-day interactions in our community, were heightened in the context of parent's hopes for their children. In this case attempts for parents to work cooperatively on efforts to enhance their children's education led to frequent conflict, eventually resulting in the formation of two separate parent advisory groups. I believe what I saw in this community is a particularly complex representation of the sometimes competing needs of parents as they focus on their children's educational success in today's climate of decreasing educational funding. Increasing numbers of parents are demanding that educational systems be more responsive to the learning and cultural needs of all children.

Issues in Aboriginal Education

Canada's public educational programs are an essential public goods resource. In today's multicultural communities we see an increasingly complex mix of parent's expectations, cultural beliefs and the values and assumptions of educational systems. As parents we are all interested in our children's future and in their success as adults. However, differing cultural and class backgrounds have been noted to impact not only parent's worldview, but also their specific goals for their children (Harkness, 1996; LeVine, 1980; LeVine & White,1987; Small, 1998).

For aboriginal parents the situation is complex and impacted by both the historical context as well as by

RC 023051

evolving cultural expectations. Parents wrestle with the role of schools in promoting traditional aboriginal knowledge and cultural identity. This debate is particularly relevant given the continuing impact of past colonizing educational experiences such as experienced at residential schools, as well as the continuing assimilationist effects of attending public schools (Barman, 1996). Aboriginal people have a long history of experiences with educational programs that were aimed primarily at assimilation rather than empowerment. Even if intentions were benign or at least not a part of active awareness, the assumptions underlying western curricula and teaching methods have typically negated the knowledge of aboriginal peoples and of its importance. This history continues to haunt interaction with current educational systems (Crey & Fournier, 1997; Royal Commission, 1997). It is believed that the impact of these experiences have contributed to and continue to contribute to the loss of a healthy cultural identity and to the maintenance of cultural values inherent in essential culturally based skills (Crey & Fournier, 1997: Royal Commission, 1997).

Historically, the introduction of western education in aboriginal communities has meant the provision of education based on western learning practices and objectives as well as resistance to the use of traditional aboriginal learning methods. In most public schools the emphasis remains on achieving the tools for success deemed necessary in the dominant cultural context. Yet for aboriginal and many other minority group parents this approach leads to the loss of the traditional cultural "tool kit". This loss appears to, in effect, decrease rather than increase the likelihood of educational success. Aboriginal parents wrestle with how to achieve healthy, culturally aware young people who are also ready for employment in a variety of settings. Maintenance of traditional cultural values, identity and learning tools enhances a strong sense of cultural efficacy and identity (Ruttan, 1999). I suggest that from this point of strength, tools from the dominant culture can then be added without loss of identity.

Changing Educational Contexts

Currently educators note the increasing focus of parents in ensuring their children are prepared in terms of the embodied capitol (knowledge, values, skills) required for success in today's competitive labor markets (Kaplan, 1996). In this vein, a trend for academically advantaged parents to try to influence public school systems on behalf of their own children has been noted (Fried,1998; Kohn, 1998; Kropp & Hudson, 1995). These parents seem to be concerned that their children not only develop necessary skills but also stand out from the crowd, which is perceived as necessary for entry into post secondary programs. It has also been suggested that as demographic trends change and family size decreases, parents are placing more emphasis on the success of their smaller number of children (Borgerhoff-Mulder, 1998; Kaplan, 1996; Lancaster, 1987; Boyd & Richerson, 1999).

Concern has been raised that given this trend, parents of less academically and socially advantaged children may not realize what is at stake or how their children may be left further behind (Fried, 1998; Kohn, 1998; Kropp & Hudson, 1995; Lareau, 1989) as parents "negotiate their self interest in the commons" (Bauch et al, 1998, p.81). In the case of aboriginal parents this issue may be further compounded when traditional values and communication styles encourage a non-interference or non-confrontational style in which more subtle communication cues are expected to be understood as expressive of the individual's wishes and desires. (Brant, 1990; Hart, 1990; Ross, 1992). Communication misunderstandings, cultural differences in expectations, as well as the residual impacts of residential school experiences (Barman, 1996) have left many aboriginal parents wondering whether their goals can be met within existing school systems and in response many bands have developed their own educational programs (Dempsey, 1993). However, it has been noted that successful culturally relevant programs must come from an aboriginal perspective and not simply replace existing staff with aboriginal staff trained only in western methods (Hookimaw-Witt, 1997).

Cooperation in Cross-Cultural Contexts

Canada is a multicultural society with an increasingly diverse population. First Nations peoples, native and foreign-born Canadians of a variety of ethnic backgrounds live and work in situations where interaction occurs on a daily basis. We live in communities made up of families. These families must interact in cooperative ways in order to respond to the varying needs of family members. This is particularly true for services for children who attend school and are involved in both formal and informal recreational activities together. Children's success in these activities and the potential for receiving equitable benefits from public goods resources (such as schools) are enhanced when parents cooperate in supporting programs.

In communities such as the one described earlier, cross-cultural miscommunication regarding what constitutes cooperative strategies can be all too frequent. Many non-aboriginal parents, new to the community, try to cooperate by getting involved, helping with the school as parent council members or classroom volunteers. However, this can be perceived by aboriginal northerners as disrespectful and in fact uncooperative. Rather than observing and learning first-hand and then joining with other parents, these individual actions can be seen as rude and self-serving. When non-aboriginal parents notice this reaction they often feel their attempts to cooperate have been rebuffed and instead opt for seeking the best options for

their own child or cooperate only in small groups of similar parents.

Schools as a Shared Public Goods Resource

Public schools, based on tax-based revenues, constitute a collective resource provided by government. For many aboriginal children education may also be a treaty right with implications that are not readily understood by parents or educators in the context of shared local school systems. Public schools are meant to provide equal access and opportunity for all children. However, given the issues discussed above, while access to public education may be equal, the accessibility and suitability of the education offered and of the teaching methods used may not be.

In our day-to-day lives, many of us tend to forget the impact of this pooling of interests and that all interests are not identical. Remarkable for the degree of cooperation that does exist, nevertheless competition to get the most benefit per child of this shared resource has an impact. This competition is heightened in times of scarce resources and increasing demands such as we are currently experiencing. Parents from varying cultural, class and ethnic groups may use a variety of strategies to obtain preferential benefits for their own children in this collective or in effect common pool resource. While we continue the rhetoric of collective good and equal opportunity, individual strategies based on class, status or ethnicity can be observed and often prove to be successful strategies.

An alternative way of understanding this issue may be provided by referring to game theory, which has proved useful in the understanding of cooperation in the context of shared resources. As noted by Ostrom, prisoners in the classic prisoner's dilemma scenario are placed in separate cells, they cannot cooperate (Ostrom, 1990). Similarly parents who have differing cultural norms, communication and decision making styles often cannot cooperate easily. Temptation to free ride or act individually increases if class, status, or ethnicity increases the likelihood of obtaining benefits for acting alone or is likely to result in a greater payoff than by acting jointly with others.

In our everyday world much of the monitoring of these dilemmas is mediated by shared norms that help us guess what the reaction of others is likely to be (Axelrod, 1997, Ostrom, 1990). These shared norms or as termed by Ostrom, "social capitol" help to reduce the likelihood of the use of non-normative strategies such as opportunistic individual action. Thus, while shared norms cannot reduce opportunistic behavior to zero, they do help us to make decisions regarding the sharing of collective resources with others. However, in the context of varying cultural norms and expectations, the effectiveness of this reliance on norms is weakened. Cross-cultural interactions are frequently complicated by not knowing or understanding the norms of others. This may lead individuals to rely on assumptions based on past experience, on communication misunderstandings or on stereotypes, which can only add to already existing barriers.

While this metaphor is interesting and I believe is worth pursuing, it is presented only in it's simplest form here. As well, it is not entirely sufficient in and of itself, especially in circumstances with complex social and historical factors such as experienced by aboriginal people. Nevertheless, this model does offer us an additional way of looking at and perhaps resolving this dilemma. As noted by Ostrum, while prisoners in a prisoner's dilemma can't change the constraints imposed on them, we are not prisoner's, we are capable of addressing these constraints and enhancing problem solving (Ostom, 1990).

Conclusion

Education and culture have been included as two of the twelve determinants of health by Health Canada. It has been noted by Dr. Fraser Mustard that health status improves with education, as does income (Standing Committee, 1995). Dr. Mustard also noted the need to work with aboriginal communities to support parents, educational programs and the health of children. Higher education levels are also associated with increased employment success and a greater sense of personal efficacy and control, as well as a higher level of overall health.

The role of cultural relevance in enhancing a sense of efficacy based on cultural identity or cultural efficacy (Ruttan, 1999) is seen by many aboriginal groups as highly important. At the same time aboriginal parents, as are all parents, are increasingly aware of the need for a high quality of development in the embodied capital (knowledge, values, skills) needed in order to take advantage of future employment opportunities. Thus for adult success education is increasingly seen by both aboriginal parents and non-aboriginal parents as a vehicle to the development of a healthy identity and of the knowledge and skills required. Nevertheless, in many mixed aboriginal and non-aboriginal school systems the sharing of increasingly scarce collective resources given differing norms and goals can result in misunderstandings and the failure to meet educational needs as identified by either group. As aboriginal bands settle land claims they may choose to run their own schools leaving less resources for public schools in an already diminished pot. It will be interesting to see if this changes the dynamic or payoffs for community wide cooperation in mixed communities. Nevertheless, clarification and education regarding the nature of this dilemma in terms of appropriate educational

practices in shared resource contexts may encourage the development of new strategies.

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